

EDUCATING WOMEN

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FEATURED TOPIC

A women's leadership development program can insert leadership as both theory and practice more centrally into the women's studies curriculum and research agenda

IT WAS Colleen Connolly, a Douglass College senior, who planted the seed in 1996 for a women's leadership program for undergraduates at Rutgers University. She was an intern at the Institute for Women's Leadership, a unique collaboration of academic centers and units that came together as a consortium around the shared mission of examining and advancing women's leadership in education, research, politics, the workplace, and the world. Institute members included Douglass College; the Department of Women's and Gender Studies; the Center for American Women and Politics; the Institute for Research on Women; the Center for Women's Global Leadership; and the Center for Women and Work. While the directors of these units had brainstormed about a cluster of shared pro-

grams, fittingly it was a student who, after interviewing representatives of all the units about their work, came up with the idea of mining the riches of the institute for student learning. She was particularly struck by the power and potential that internships held for undergraduate education, and envisioned a required internship and practicum as a central component of such a leadership education program.

In recent years, a number of leadership programs have been created for women in business, women who head nonprofit organizations, women in professions like law and medicine, and women students. Although there are over five hundred colleges and universities in the United States (and a growing number around the world) that offer programs on leadership and leadership development, there are far fewer that offer programs specifically on women's leadership, and that are affiliated with academic departments rather than student life offices. This article describes a women's leadership development program at Rutgers University that draws on the rich scholarship in gender studies to reimagine leadership, to

accelerate young women to leadership, and to prepare them as educated citizens who will make a difference in the world.

The Leadership Scholars Certificate Program reflects the institute's commitment to and definition of leadership as inclusive and participatory, and linked to an obligation to work for positive social transformation (Hartman 1999). Although feminist leadership is not a commonly used term, the institute's definition of women's leadership implies feminism, and has similarities with Leila Rupp's definition of feminism as "a worldview that ranks gender a primary category of analysis or explanatory factor for understanding the unequal and unjust distribution of power and resources in society" (Rupp 1981, 283).

Developing such a worldview can enable people engaged in leadership development not only to better understand women's continuing lack of access to power and resources, but may also stimulate them to challenge the lack of access of other social groups as well. With such an approach, gender becomes a category of analysis for seeing and understanding the skewed nature of how positional leaders are selected and rise to power, and how resources are distributed.

Leadership development for women, then, can be a subversive educational tool. It can enlighten corporate women about gender dynamics in organizations that keep women from getting ahead, for example, or attract young college women who might not otherwise consider taking a women's studies class to come into the discipline through the entry point of leadership. Stark figures about women's underrepresentation in governance and politics around the world, in officer positions, or as board members in American corporations can stimulate a commitment to the advancement of women's leadership (see Rhode 2003). Leadership education situated in a women's studies framework encourages students to question existing social structures, particularly as they are made aware of the paucity of women as decision makers in public office, in institutions of higher education, business, and other social arenas. It also

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Leaders for the Twenty-first Century

provides a forum for critically investigating women's historical and contemporary roles as leaders in communities, in the home, in grass-roots groups, and in volunteer organizations.

Leadership has not been a key concern in the field of women's studies, which for the past quarter century has concentrated more on exploring the connections between race, class, and gender, and critiquing the social constructions that have negatively impacted women's lives. Social change *was* key to the development of women's studies, however, which began in American higher education as the academic arm of the women's movement. A women's leadership development program can insert leadership as both theory and practice more centrally into the women's studies curriculum and research agenda, while it promotes liberal learning by making connections between theories about women's lives and policies and actions that impact their lives.

The Leadership Scholars Program

A two-year, nineteen-credit program for undergraduate women, the Leadership Scholars Certificate Program combines classroom learning, research and policy internships, and independent social action projects to give participants a distinctive learning experience that is at once theoretical and practical. The program seeks to expand students' understanding of leadership, policy making, and social change and to encourage them to take responsibility for making change. Desired program outcomes are linked to research that suggests women leaders share common traits in the areas of leadership skills, interpersonal skills, problem-solving and decision-making abilities, and personal organization and time management (Aurora and Caliper 2005). Fifteen to eighteen students are chosen in a selective process each year, so that about thirty-five students participate annually in the two-year sequence. Although a small program in a large research university, it is a replicable model for other institutions of higher education and a laboratory for examining what happens when, to use Elizabeth Tidball's phrase, women are taken seriously. Her philosophy



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about women's colleges applies as well to this women's leadership education program:

What works for women resides within the *wholeness* of the environment, originating from a mission in which women are taken seriously. It has to do with creating a community in which women have a clear sense of ownership, knowing that they make a difference and knowing that they matter and that they truly belong and always will. What is essential is not to be found in quantifiable categories. (Tidball 1999, 140)

The four goals of the program are consistent with the goals of liberal education in their emphasis on high-quality undergraduate education, as well as welfare of the community and questions of the common good. They are (1) to offer students an opportunity to deepen their understanding of leadership and women's contributions to social change; (2) to enhance students' leadership abilities through a concentrated academic sequence and extracurricular offerings; (3) to provide an opportunity for students to learn the issues and problems specific to their disciplinary fields and to develop ways to implement a social action project; and (4) to build bridges between the university and the community by connecting women students with community representatives and women leaders and by providing career-building internships in corporations and nonprofit organizations.

Students in the program earn a certificate in women's leadership from the Department of Women's and Gender Studies and the Institute for Women's Leadership that complements their baccalaureate degrees. This kind of education addresses the estrangement of liberal and professional studies by bringing together high-achieving students who share a commitment to both community welfare and women's leadership for social change with majors as diverse as comparative literature and marketing, history and cell biology, and the visual arts and physics. Using gender as the lens and women's leadership as the tool, they explore the policy areas that are embedded in their disciplines and that cross disciplines: health, law, poverty, politics, work, human rights, arts/literature/media, and education. Students select one of these "tracks" to follow through the program, and all of their work in the two-year sequence relates to it. This interdisciplinary learning has a strong connection to policy; it might be called applied women's studies.

Like liberal education, the Leadership Scholars Program aims to be representative of our diverse democracy. Students in the program are racially diverse: over the past seven years, 40 percent of the students enrolled in the program have been women of color. This reflects the rich racial and ethnic diversity of the Rutgers student body, and adds to the multiplicity of perspectives that inform and enrich the program. It could also suggest that leadership training is attractive to minority students, who face the double challenge of bias on the basis of gender and race, and may recognize leadership development as something they need even more than do white students.

The program structure

The program includes three main components: coursework, an internship/field site experience, and a social action project. It includes five required women's studies classes, including a seminar on women and leadership, in which leadership is studied through intensive readings in United States and global women's history, combined with theoretical and structural studies of gender in society, as well as case studies of women leaders.

The internship seminar, taken in the second semester, focuses on women, work, and community and combines theoretical readings about women in the workplace with a practical experience in a work or field site. It exposes students to issues women face in the workplace, including the wage gap, the challenge of having both families and careers, and the ways that gender schemas often disadvantage working women. The seminar also reinforces the importance of young women's civic engagement and participation in the political process.

Organizations that sponsor our interns include local nonprofits such as a domestic violence shelter, a health clinic that serves the largely Mexican immigrant community of New Brunswick, New Jersey (where the university is located), and an institute that teaches art to underserved urban high school students. Such internship placements help bridge the gap between university and community, while developing students' ethical capacities and sense of civic purpose. With the help of a foundation committed to youth civic engagement, the institute is making these community partnerships part of the ongoing structure of the program.

In addition, the program has built up a list of internship sites beyond the local community; this includes national women's organizations in nearby New York City, progressive corporations, and state government offices. Students intern 140 hours over one semester, learning about the organization's mission and how it is fulfilled, women's leadership in organizations, and gaining valuable professional experience and skills development. In some cases they reach across differences as they work with constituencies unlike themselves, further developing themselves as citizens and social actors (Trigg and Balliet 2001). The internship experience encourages students to move from the individual to the structural: this expanding worldview is deepened even further in the social action project experience.

The social action project, conducted during the third semester, provides a "sphere of action" that requires students to practice leadership. In early Greek and Latin, the word leadership is derived from the verb "to act," and this definition informs the project. As Elizabeth Tidball writes (2000, 30), "even outstanding ability needs to be trained, directed, provided with a sphere of action, and rewarded in order to flourish." The student-designed projects reflect the variety of their interests and provide concrete examples of the students' capacity to transform knowledge into action, and to address vexing social issues such as illiteracy, educational disparities in urban schools, or the health of Latina women. Each student is given a \$500 stipend to implement her project, for which she is required to write a formal funding proposal, modeled on one that would be given to a foundation.

In exit surveys and interviews conducted with the seven graduating classes, this component of the program has been consistently rated the highest. Notable projects have included the founding of a campus newspaper encouraging unity among diverse Asian groups at the university, the creation of a literacy awareness program at the local health center, a poetry workshop and publication at a Jewish home for the aged, and a one-day leadership workshop for urban high school girls that the institute is now expanding into an after-school program. Leadership projects like these serve the community as they advocate social change to improve the lives of both men and women. Student ambassadors can bridge the gulf

between the university and the community, fulfilling Adrienne Rich's compelling idea of the role a university might play in addressing community-specific problems:

A university responsible to women's needs would serve the needs of the human, visible community in which it sits—the neighborhood, the city, the rural county, its true environment. . . . [T]he university should address itself to the microcosms of national problems and issues that exist locally, and it should do so with the greatest possible sense that it will not simply be giving, but be receiving, because academe has a great deal to learn from women and from other unprivileged people. (1992, 147)

Leadership projects can teach that "failure" and "success" are not always easy to define, and can lead to the resiliency and perseverance that are demanded of leaders. Such an experience offers women students the unique opportunity to take risks in a supportive environment. One model of leadership development described by Karin Klenke includes three components: challenge, recognition, and support. These are described as follows:

(1) the *challenge* of new situations and difficult goals prompts leaders to learn the lessons that will help them perform at higher levels; (2) *recognition* includes acknowledgment of achievements and rewards for accomplishments, along with resources to continue high performance; while (3) *support* entails acceptance and understanding, along with the benefits that help a leader incorporate her leadership role into a full and fulfilling life (1996, 248).

The program strives to include challenge, recognition, and support in its model for the leadership project.

Although three-credit, one-semester requirements, these projects can launch long-term commitments to civic engagement. For example, a philosophy major doing her work in the program on poverty interned with the National Congress of Neighborhood Women, a Brooklyn group whose mission is to empower grassroots women's leadership in their communities. For her project, she began a discussion group among women who lived in a New Brunswick public housing project slated to be torn down through a federal urban revitalization grant program. This student won a Fullbright fellowship the following year to

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research grassroots women's community development organizations in Ecuador, and wrote about the insights that the leadership program's connection between experiential learning and academic study had given her. "In my research here," she wrote from Ecuador,

I am learning a great deal about the lives of women in poverty as well as applying some of the theory that I learned at Rutgers to my experiences and observations. . . . I benefited from exploring grassroots women's issues on a practical level through my experiences in the IWL program. . . . Although it sometimes feels like a world away from New Jersey, I have discovered that discussions with other women on gender equality—whether it be in a remote jungle community, a poor neighborhood in Quito, or a classroom in Hickman Hall—don't really differ all that much! (Goldenberg 2001, 6)

Now, five years after her graduation, this young woman leader is a staff member of this same advocacy organization where she interned, and recently joined a delegation of grassroots women who spoke to government representatives at the United Nations about global poverty, in the hopes of impacting the Millennium Development Goals.

The importance of women's leadership development in liberal education

Why does women's leadership development matter? What is its importance in higher education and in educating women citizens for the twenty-first century? Women's leadership development is based on the premise that women historically have been excluded from formal leadership positions and continue to be dramatically underrepresented. It recognizes the important roles that women have played

in informal positions of leadership, and asks that we examine women's leadership at the same time that we try to advance it. It suggests the limitations of exclusive leadership as it has (and continues to be) practiced in arenas where far-reaching decisions are made, and it recognizes the issue of gender differences in opportunities for leadership.

There are powerful and compelling arguments for why women's leadership makes a difference and why we should care about the dearth of women in leadership positions, both in the United States and globally. Women's leadership can be a vital source of change in an increasingly dangerous world. "The world needs women to take more leadership," Charlotte Bunch, director of the Center for Women's Global Leadership, has written. "Women at this moment in history bring new perspectives and values to the table that can revitalize and transform debates and options in a globe that is threatened with self-destruction based on past—predominantly male—leadership" (Institute for Women's Leadership 2002, 17). The urgency to develop and tap women's leadership is ever more critical in our post-9/11 world. A number of scholars have argued that women do bring something different to the leadership table, that they make different kinds of leaders than men. A new study of executive women concludes that women's style of leadership is different from men's; the authors describe it as inclusive, open, consensus building, collaborative, and collegial (Aurora and Caliper 2005). Using the perspective of politics, Susan Carroll, Rutgers professor at the Center for the American Women and Politics, has suggested that women political leaders feel a responsibility to represent women and their interests. Drawing on interviews done by the Center for American

Women and Politics with women in the 103rd and 104th Congresses, Carroll stated, "Regardless of whether the issue is foreign aid, the budget, or the environment, women public officials frequently examine the issue through a gendered lens, and consequently more often think about the possible impact of the policy on the lives of women and men" (Institute for Women's Leadership 2002, 24-5).

Young women's leadership matters as well, not only because young women will be among the next generation of public leaders, but also because society needs their vision, their civic engagement, and their idealism. The development of women leaders on college campuses is also important because undergraduate women continue to face unique challenges. A recent report released by Duke University on the Women's Initiative, a study of the status of women at the university, showed that undergraduate women at Duke feel intense pressure to conform to "effortless perfection," an idealized expectation that they will be "smart, accomplished, fit, beautiful, and popular, and that all this would happen without visible effort" (Lipka 2004, A35). The report described a campus culture dominated by fraternities, where "being 'cute' trumps being smart for women," where some female students suffer from "a claustrophobic sense of failure," and where body image and idealized standards of beauty reign supreme. The ripple this report created through other college communities demonstrates that these pressures are not unique to undergraduate women at Duke. One of the initiatives proposed by the Duke administration in response was to begin the Alice M. Baldwin Scholars program, which Duke's departing president Nannerl O. Keohane envisioned as a way to "seed the campus" with student leaders who are conscious of women's issues.

Educating women for leadership should become a priority for higher education in the twenty-first century. A high-quality, intellectually challenging women's leadership development program can connect experiential learning to academic inquiry, and extend the classroom to the cocurriculum, the community, and the world. Despite thirty years of women's studies scholarship, feminist activism, challenges to gender inequities in the U.S. courts, and women's entry and ascension in the professions, American women still face systemic biases and the glass ceiling, and continue to

be woefully underrepresented in decision-making positions in many arenas. Particularly at a moment when the existence of women's colleges like Douglass College is being threatened, the importance of women's leadership programs within higher education and liberal education should be considered. Renewing liberal education for the twenty-first century must include attention to educating women not only as intellectual and ethical citizens, but as leaders who will contribute their passion, vision, and commitment to improving the welfare of the community and the world. □

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